

After 30 Years, the Media Feed an Unending Curiosity

11/20/93 By Howard Kurtz
Washington Post Staff Writer

Ask not when this deluge of docudramas, cover stories and best-selling exposés about John F. Kennedy will peter out. It may well go on forever. Today's 30th anniversary of that awful day in Dallas has again brought the familiar images flickering across the screen: The shock of hair. The Beantown accent. The thrusting finger. Sunglasses and sailboats. Marilyn Monroe. Pillbox hats. The merchandising of JFK's life and death has become a cottage industry that seems to grow larger with each passing year, with more than a dozen major TV specials and newspaper and magazine pieces in the last week.

"It's guaranteed box office," says Evan Thomas, who wrote last week's Newsweek cover story on the Kennedy assassination. "You can't miss writing about the Kennedys. There doesn't seem to be a saturation point. He's the most romantic-looking guy in the world, his family is romantic-looking, and there's a soap opera quality to the Kennedys that never fails to sell."

The Kennedy legend offers a multitude of media

See JFK, D4, Col. 1

The Kennedy Fascination

JFK, From D1

possibilities. Camelot worship for true believers. Illicit sex for tabloid types. Muscular showdowns with Moscow for Cold War enthusiasts. Tangled conspiracy theories for Oliver Stone fans.

At bottom, there is also a sense of nostalgia for what the cover of U.S. News & World Report called "The Lost World of John Kennedy"—an optimistic time when Americans believed in their government and a limitless future that somehow was snuffed out at Dealey Plaza.

"There is a widely held view that Kennedy's death changed America irreparably and forever," says historian Michael Beschloss. "It mainly depends on Americans' tendency to assume, probably wrongly, that Kennedy would have withdrawn the troops from Vietnam." In the popular imagination, had Kennedy lived there would have been no war in Southeast Asia tearing America apart; no Vietnam means no Nixon; no Nixon, no Watergate, and so on.

"Despite the public appetite for all things Kennedy, the spate of TV specials has so far fallen short in the ratings. An NBC movie, "Fatal Deception: Mrs. Lee Harvey Oswald,"



Something Kennedy for everyone.

finished third in its time period, as did a CBS retrospective called "Jack." A PBS "Frontline" special on Oswald got better-than-average ratings for the series. Figures are not yet in for "CBS Reports: Who Killed JFK? The Final Chapter." Or for Larry King's TNT chat-'em-up with celebrities about where they were on Nov. 22, 1963. (Guests ranged from Bill and Hillary Rodham Clinton to Ben Bradlee to Pete Rose to Chubby Checker.) Even "A Walton Thanksgiving Reunion" dealt with the Kennedy killing.

Newspapers have also joined the fray. The New York Daily News yesterday published a special edition on what it called "A Day Burned in Our Soul." The Washington Post

ran a three-part series on the assassination last week. The New York Times yesterday ran a major retrospective by Tom Wicker and devoted the cover of its book review to "30 Years of Assassination Theories."

On the literary front, Gerald Posner's "Case Closed" provided ammunition for the Oswald-acted-alone crowd. Richard Reeves's "President Kennedy: Portrait of Power" prompted a luncheon invitation from President Clinton and is selling modestly well. Nigel Hamilton's "JFK: Reckless Youth," which detailed young Kennedy's sexual conquests and family turmoil, spent 11 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list and became a two-part ABC movie this week.

Even television has its limits, however. Hamilton says ABC cut a riveting scene suggesting that young JFK walked in on his father having sex with Gloria Swanson.

Ted Kennedy and three relatives took to the New York Times Op-Ed page to denounce the British author's book as trash. Hamilton says the family is determined to suppress the truth.

"This Camelot myth, this fantasy, just took root, just grew like in some fable," he says. "In England we ennoble people; you go to the House of Lords. Jackie wanted to ennoble his memory at that traumatic moment and cement the whole American morale."

In legislative terms, Kennedy's thousand days was not a time of great accomplishment. "With most presidents you don't see this amount of attention 30 years later," Beschloss says. "Eisenhower is probably a more important figure. Yet Kennedy's life and career and legend has a lot of resonance beyond his political effectiveness."

Reeves attributes much of the current hoopla to Bill Clinton and Oliver Stone—Clinton for emulating his fortysomething predecessor, Stone for stoking conspiratorial fears with his movie "JFK." Reeves sees the 30th anniversary as an entertainment-driven phenomenon that has created a "fictional hero," particularly for those who don't remember the New Frontier.

"We were young and everything seemed possible," Reeves says of his generation. "Our own children have gotten that message. They think we had it easy and want to know why they don't have it as good. One college

student asked me, 'Why don't we get a Kennedy?'"

For all the celebration of Kennedy's life—the young man who would now be 76 remains forever frozen in time—the media seem perennially fixated on his death. With a huge cast of possible suspects—CIA operatives, Mafia dons, Fidel Castro, anti-Castro Cubans—the grassy-knoll crowd never seems to run out of shadowy subplots.

Friday's "CBS Reports" (done in conjunction with The Post) was the sixth CBS investigation of the Kennedy killing. The Dan Rather special concluded rather dramatically that there is no evidence to dispute the finding that Oswald acted alone.

"It was a defining moment in many of our lives," says executive producer Linda Mason. "Half the population is too young to remember it, and the rest of us have heard so much during the years. A lot of people out there believe the CIA was involved. In our poll, nine out of 10 people questioned whether Oswald acted alone. That's kind of shocking."

For some Kennedy-watchers, this endless assassination journalism amounts to wretched excess. "Most sensible people would agree we have spent far too much time and effort and money chewing over the death of JFK," Hamilton says.

Evan Thomas sees a more practical side. "From a journalistic point of view, it has the virtue of being a controversy that will never be settled," he says. "So there will be 60th-anniversary issues and 90th-anniversary issues."